

Bob Dylan: The Song Talk Interview

By: Paul Zollo

Date: 1991

Transcribed from GBS #3 booklet

"I've made shoes for everyone, even you, while I still go barefoot" from "I and I" By Bob Dylan

Songwriting? What do I know about songwriting? Bob Dylan asked, and then broke into laughter. He was wearing blue jeans and a white tank-top T-shirt, and drinking coffee out of a glass. "It tastes better out of a glass," he said grinning. His blonde acoustic guitar was leaning on a couch near where we sat. Bob Dylan's guitar . His influence is so vast that everything that surrounds takes on enlarged significance: Bob Dylan's moccasins. Bob Dylan's coat .

*"And the ghost of 'lectricity howls in the bones of her face
Where these visions of Johanna have now taken my place.
The harmonicas play the skeleton keys and the rain
And these visions of Johanna are now all that remain" from
"Visions of Johanna"*

Pete Seeger said, "All songwriters are links in a chain," yet there are few artists in this evolutionary arc whose influence is as profound as that of Bob Dylan. It's hard to imagine the art of songwriting as we know it without him. Though he insists in this interview that "somebody else would have done it," he was the instigator, the one who knew that songs could do more , that they could take on more. He knew that songs could contain a lyrical richness and meaning far beyond the scope of all previous pop songs, and they could possess as much beauty and power as the greatest poetry, and that by being written in rhythm and rhyme and merged with music, they could speak to our souls.

Starting with the models made by his predecessors, such as the talking blues, Dylan quickly discarded old forms and began to fashion new ones. He broke all the rules of songwriting without abandoning the craft and care that holds songs together. He brought the linguistic beauty of Shakespeare, Byron, and Dylan Thomas, and the expansiveness and beat experimentation of Ginsberg, Kerouac and Ferlinghetti, to the folk poetry of Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams.

And when the world was still in the midst of accepting this new form, he brought music to a new place again, fusing it with the electricity of rock and roll. "Basically, he showed that anything goes," Robbie Robertson said. John Lennon said that it was hearing Dylan that allowed him to make the leap from writing empty pop songs to expressing the actuality of his life and the depths of his own soul. "Help" was a real call for help, he said, and prior to hearing Dylan it didn't occur to him that songs could contain such direct meaning. When he asked Paul Simon how he made the leap in his writing from fifties rock & roll songs like "Hey Schoolgirl" to writing "Sound of Silence" he said, "I really can't imagine it could have been anyone else besides Bob Dylan."

*"Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky
with one hand waving free,
silhouetted by the sea,
circled by the circus sands,
With all memory and fate
driven deep beneath the waves,
Let me forget about today until tomorrow." from "Mr.
Tambourine Man"*

There's an unmistakable elegance in Dylan's words, an almost biblical beauty that he has sustained in his songs throughout the years. He refers to it as a "gallantry" in the following, and pointed to it as the single thing that sets his songs apart from others. Though he's maybe more famous for the freedom and expansiveness of his lyrics, all of his songs possess this exquisite care and love for the language. As Shakespeare and Byron did in their times, Dylan has taken English, perhaps the world's plainest language, and instilled it with a timeless, mythic grace.

*"Ring them bells, sweet Martha, for the poor man's son
Ring them bells so the world will know that God is one
Oh, the shepherd is asleep
where the willows weep
and the mountains are filled with lost sheep" from "Ring
Them Bells"*

As much as he has stretched, expanded and redefined the rules of songwriting, Dylan is a tremendously meticulous craftsman. A brutal critic of his own work, he works and reworks the words of his songs in the studio and even continues to rewrite certain ones even after they've been recorded and released. "They're not written in stone," he said. With such a wondrous wealth of language at his fingertips, he discards imagery and lines other songwriters would sell their souls to

discover. The Bootleg Series , a recently released collection of previously unissued recordings, offers a rare opportunity to see the revisions and regrouping his songs go through. "Idiot Wind" is one of his angriest songs ("You don't hear a song like that every day," he said), which he recorded on Blood On The Tracks in a way that reflects this anger, emphasizing lines of condemnation like "one day you'll be in the ditch, flies buzzin' around your eyes, blood on your saddle." On The Bootleg Series , we get an alternate approach to the song, a quiet, tender reading of the same lines that makes the inherent disquiet of the song even more disturbing, the tenderness of Dylan's delivery adding a new level of genuine sadness to lines like "people see me all the time and they just can't remember how to act." The peak moment of the song is the penultimate chorus when Dylan addresses America: "Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull, from the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol." On the Bootleg version, this famous line is still in formation: "Idiot wind, blowing every time you move your jaw, from the Grand Coulee Dam to the Mardi Gras." His song "Jokerman" also went through a similar evolution, as a still unreleased bootleg of the song reveals. Like "Idiot Wind," the depth and intensity of the lyric is sustained over an extraordinary amount of verses, yet even more scenes were shot that wound up on the cutting room floor, evidence of an artist overflowing with the abundance of creation:

*"It's a shadowy world
skies are slippery gray
A woman just gave birth to a prince today
and dressed him in scarlet
He'll put the priest in his pocket,
put the blade to the heat
Take the motherless children off the street
And place them at the feet of a harlot"* from "Jokerman" on Infidels

*"It's a shadowy world
skies are slippery gray
A woman just gave birth to a prince today
and she's dressed in scarlet
He'll turn priests into pimps
and make all men bark
Take a woman who could have been Joan of Arc
and turn her into a harlot"* from "Jokerman" on Outfidels, a bootleg

Often Dylan lays abstraction aside and writes songs as clear and telling as any of Woody Guthrie's narrative ballads, finding heroes and

antiheroes in our modern times as Woody found in his. Some of these subjects might be thought of as questionable choices for heroic treatment, such as underworld boss Joey Gallo, about whom he wrote the astounding song, "Joey." It's a song that is remarkable for its cinematic clarity; Dylan paints a picture of a life and death so explicit and exact that we can see every frame of it, and even experience Gallo's death as if we were sitting there watching it. And he does it with a rhyme scheme and a meter that makes the immediacy of the imagery even more striking:

*"One day they blew him down
in a clam bar in New York
He could see it coming through the door
as he lifted up his fork.
He pushed the table over to protect his family
Then he staggered out into the streets
of Little Italy." from "Joey"*

"Yes, well, what can you know about anybody?" Dylan asked, and it's a good question. He's been a mystery for years, "kind of impenetrable, really," Paul Simon said, and that mystery is not penetrated by this interview or any interview. Dylan's answers are often more enigmatic than the questions themselves, and like his songs, they give you a lot to think about while not necessarily, revealing much about the man. In person, as others have noted, he is Chaplinesque. His body is smaller and his head bigger than one might expect, giving the effect of a kid wearing a Bob Dylan mask. He possesses one of the world's most striking faces; while certain stars might seem surprisingly normal and unimpressive in the flesh, Dylan is perhaps even more startling to confront than one might expect. Seeing those eyes , and that nose , it's clear it could be no one else than he, and to sit at a table with him and face those iconic features is no less impressive than suddenly finding yourself sitting face to face with William Shakespeare. It's a face we associate with an enormous, amazing body of work, work that has changed the world. But it's not really the kind of face one expects to encounter in everyday life.

Though Van Morrison and others have called him the world's greatest poet, he doesn't think of himself as a poet. "Poets drown in lakes," he said to us. Yet he's written some of the most beautiful poetry the world has known, poetry of love and outrage, of abstraction and clarity, of timelessness and relativity. Though he is faced with the evidence of a catalogue of songs that would contain the whole careers of a dozen fine songwriters, Dylan told us he doesn't consider himself to be a professional songwriter. "For me it's always been more confession than pro -fessional," he said in distinctive Dylan cadence.

"My songs aren't written on a schedule." Well, how are they written, we asked? This is the question at the heart of this interview, the main one that comes to mind when looking over all the albums, or witnessing the amazing array of moods, masks, styles and forms all represented on the recently released Bootleg Series-. How has he done it? It was the first question asked, and though he deflected it at first with his customary humor, it's a question we returned to a few times. "Start me off somewhere," he said smiling, as if he might be left alone to divulge the secrets of his songwriting, and out talk began.

SongTalk: Okay, Arlo Guthrie recently said, "Songwriting is like fishing in a stream; you put in your line and hope you catch something. And I don't think anyone downstream from Bob Dylan ever caught anything."

Dylan:[Much laughter]

ST: Any idea how you've been able to catch so many?

Dylan:[Laughs] It's probably the bait.[More laughter]

ST: What kind of bait do you use?

Dylan: Uh... bait... You've got to use some bait. Otherwise you sit around and expect songs to come to you. Forcing it is using bait.

ST: Does that work for you?

Dylan: Well, no. Throwing yourself into into a situation that would demand a response is like using bait. People who write about stuff that hasn't really happened to them are inclined to do that.

ST: When you write songs, do you try to consciously guide the meaning or do you try to follow subconscious directions?

Dylan: Well, you know, motivation is something you never know behind any song, really. Anybody's song, you never know what the motivation was. It's nice to be able to put yourself in an environment where you can completely accept all the unconscious stuff that comes to you from your inner workings of your mind. And block yourself off to where you can control it all, take it down. Edgar Allan Poe must have done that. People who are dedicated writers, of which there are some , but mostly people get their information today over a television set or some kind of a way that's hitting them on all their senses. It's not just a great novel anymore. You have to be able to get the thoughts out of your mind.

ST: How do you do that?

Dylan: Well, first of all, there's two kinds of thoughts in your mind: there's good thoughts and evil thoughts. Both come through your mind. Some people are more loaded down with one than another. Nevertheless, they come through. And you have to be able to sort them out, if you want to be a songwriter, if you want to be a good song singer. You must get rid of all that baggage. You ought to be able to sort out those thoughts, because they don't mean anything, they're just pulling you around, too. It's important to get rid of all them thoughts. Then you can do something from some kind of surveillance of the situation. You have some kind of place where you can see but it can't affect you. Where you can bring something to the matter, besides just take, take, take, take, take. As so many situations in life are today. Take, take, take, that's all that it is. What's in it for me? That syndrome which started in the Me Decade, whenever that was. We're still in that. It's still happening.

ST: Is songwriting for you more a sense of taking something from some place else?

Dylan: Well, someplace else is always a heartbeat away. There's no rhyme or reason to it. There's no rule. That's what makes it so attractive. There isn't any rule. You can still have your wits about you and do something that gets you off in a multitude of ways. As you very well know, or else you yourself wouldn't be doing it.

ST: Your songs often bring us back to other times, and are filled with mythic, magical images. A song like "Changing Of The Guard" seems to take place centuries ago, with lines like "They shaved her head/she was torn between Jupiter and Apollo/a messenger arrived with a black nightingale...". How do you connect with a song like that?

Dylan:[Pause] A song like that, there's no way of knowing, after the fact, unless somebody's there to take it down in chronological order, what the motivation was behind it. [Pause] But on one level, of course, it's no different from anything else of mine. It's the same amount of metric verses like a poem. To me, like a poem. The melodies in my mind are very simple, they're very simple, they're just based on music we've all heard growing up. And that and music which went beyond that, which went back further, Elizabethan ballads and whatnot... To me, it's old. [Laughs] It's old. It's not something, with my minimal amount of talent, if you could call it that, minimum amount... To me somebody coming along now would definitely read what's out there if they're seriously concerned with being an artist who's going to still be an artist when they get to be Picasso's age. You're better off learning

some music theory. You're just better off, yeah, if you want to write songs. Rather than just take a hillbilly twang, you know, and try to base it all on that. Even country music is more orchestrated than it used to be. You're better off having some feel for music that you don't have to carry in your head, that you can write down. To me those are the people who... are serious about this craft. People who go about it that way. Not people who just want to pour out their insides and they got to get a big idea out and they want to tell the world about this , sure, you can do it through a song, you always could. You can use a song for anything, you know. The world don't need any more songs.

ST: You don't think so?

Dylan: No. They've got enough. They've got way too many. As a matter of fact, if nobody wrote any songs from this day on, the world ain't gonna suffer for it. Nobody cares. There's enough songs for people to listen to, if they want to listen to songs. For every man, woman and child on earth, they could be sent, probably, each of them, a hundred records, and never be repeated. There's enough songs. Unless someone's gonna come along with a pure heart and has something to say. That's a different story. But as far as songwriting, any idiot could do it. If you see me do it, any idiot could do it. [Laughs] It's just not that difficult of a thing. Everybody writes a song just like everybody's got that one great novel in them. There aren't a lot of people like me. You just had your interview with Neil [Young], John Mellencamp... Of course, most of my ilk that came along write their own songs and play them. It wouldn't matter if anybody ever made another record. They've got enough songs. To me, someone who writes really good songs is Randy Newman. There's a lot of people who write good songs. As songs. Now Randy might not go out on stage and knock you out, or knock your socks off. And he's not going to get people thrilled in the front row. He ain't gonna do that. But he's gonna write a better song than most people who can do it. You know, he's got that down to an art. Now Randy knows music. He knows music But it doesn't get any better than "Louisiana" or "Cross Charleston Bay" ["Sail Away"]. It doesn't get any better than that. It's like a classically heroic anthem theme. He did it. There's quite a few people who did it. Not that many people in Randy's class. Brian Wilson. He can write melodies that will beat the band. Three people could combine on a song and make it a great song. If one person would have written the same song, maybe you would have never heard it. It might get buried on some... rap record. [Laughs]

ST: Still, when you've come out with some of your new albums of songs, those songs fit that specific time better than any songs that had

already been written. Your new songs have always shown us new possibilities.

Dylan: It's not a good idea and it's bad luck to look for life's guidance to popular entertainers. It's bad luck to do that. No one should do that. Popular entertainers are fine, there's nothing the matter with that but as long as you know where you're standing and what ground you're on, many of them, they don't know what they're doing either.

ST: But your songs are more than pop entertainment...

Dylan: Some people say so. Not to me.

ST: No?

Dylan: Pop entertainment means nothing to me. Nothing. You know, Madonna's good. Madonna's good, she's talented, she puts all kind of stuff together, she's learned her thing... But it's the kind of thing which takes years and years out of your life to be able to do. You've got to sacrifice a whole lot to do that. Sacrifice. If you want to make it big, you've got to sacrifice a whole lot. It's all the same, it's all the same. [Laughs]

ST: Van Morrison said that you are our greatest living poet. Do you think of yourself in those terms?

Dylan: [Pause] Sometimes. It's within me. It's within me to put myself up and be a poet. But it's a dedication. [Softly] It's a big dedication. [Pause] Poets don't drive cars. [Laughs] Poets don't go to the supermarket. Poets don't empty the garbage. Poets aren't on the PTA. Poets, you know, they don't go picket the Better Housing Bureau, or whatever. Poets don't... Poets don't even speak on the telephone. Poets don't even talk to anybody. Poets do a lot of listening and... and usually they know why they're poets! [Laughs] Yeah, there are... what can you say? The world don't need any more poems, it's got Shakespeare. There's enough of everything. You name it, there's enough of it. There was too much of it with electricity, maybe, some people said that. Some people said lightbulb was going too far. Poets live on the land. They behave in a gentlemanly way. And live by their own gentlemanly code. [Pause] And die broke. Or drown in lakes. Poets usually have very unhappy endings. Look at Keats' life. Look at Jim Morrison, if you want to call him a poet. Look at him. Although some people say that he is really in the Andes.

ST: Do you think so?

Dylan: Well, it never crossed my mind to think one way or the other about it, but you do hear that talk. Piggyback in the Andes. Riding a donkey.

ST: People have a hard time believing that Shakespeare really wrote all of his work because there is so much of it. Do you have a hard time accepting that?

Dylan: People have a hard time accepting anything that overwhelms them.

ST: Might they think that of you, years from now, that no one man could have produced so much incredible work?

Dylan: They could. They could look back and think nobody produced it. [Softly] It's not to anybody's best interest to think about how they will be perceived tomorrow. It hurts you in the long run.

ST: But aren't there songs of your own that you know will always be around?

Dylan: Who's gonna sing them? My songs really aren't meant to be covered. No, not really. Can you think of... Well, they do get covered, but it's covered. They're not intentionally written to be covered, but okay, they do.

ST: Your songs are much more enjoyable to sing and play than most songs...

Dylan: Do you play them on piano or guitar?

ST: Both.

Dylan: Acoustic guitar?

ST: Mostly.

Dylan: Do you play jazz? It never hurts to learn as many chords as you can. All kinds. Sometime it will change the inflection of a whole song, a straight chord, or, say, an augmented seventh chord.

ST: Do you have favorite keys to work in?

Dylan: On the piano, my favorite keys are the black keys. And they sound better on guitar, too. Sometimes when a song's in a flat key, say B flat, bring it to the guitar, you might want to put it in A. But... that's

an interesting thing you just said. It changes the reflection. Mainly in mine the songs sound different. They sound... when you take a black key song and put it on the guitar, which means you're playing in A flat, not too many people like to play in those keys. To me it doesn't matter.[Laughs] It doesn't matter because my fingering is the same anyway. So there are songs that, even without the piano, which is the dominant sound if you're playing in the black keys -- why else would you play in that key except to have that dominant piano sound? -- the songs that go into those keys right from the piano, they sound different. They sound deeper. Yeah. They sound deeper. Everything sounds deeper in those black keys. They're not guitar keys, though. Guitar bands don't usually like to play in those keys, which kind of gives me an idea, actually, of a couple of songs that could actually sound better in black keys.

ST: Do keys have different colors for you?

Dylan: Sure. Sure. [Softly] Sure.

ST: You've written some great A minor songs. I think of "One More Cup Of Coffee" --

Dylan: Right. B minor might sound even better.

ST: How come?

Dylan: Well, it might sound better because you're playing a lot of open chords if you're playing in A minor. If you play in B minor, it will force you to play higher. And the chords... you're bound, someplace along the line, because there are so many chords in that song, or seem to be anyway, you're bound someplace along the line to come down to an open chord on the bottom. From B. You would hit E someplace along the line. Try it in B minor. [Laughs] Maybe it will be a hit for you. A hit is a number one song, isn't it? Yeah.

ST: When you sit down to write a song, do you pick a key first that will fit a song? Or do you change keys while you're writing?

Dylan: Yeah. Yeah. Maybe like in the middle of the thing. There are ways you can get out of whatever you've gotten into. You want to get out of it. It's bad enough getting into it. But the thing to do as soon as you get into it is realize you must get out of it. And unless you get out of it quickly and effortlessly, there's no use staying in it. It will just drag you down. You could be spending years writing the same song, telling the same story, doing the same thing. So once you involve yourself in it, once you accidentally have slipped into it, the thing is to

get out. So your primary impulse is going to take you so far. But then you might think, well, you know, is this one of these things where it's all just going to come? And then all of the sudden you start thinking. And when my mind starts thinking, "What's happening now? Oh, there's a story here," and my mind starts to get into it, that's trouble right away. That's usually big trouble. And as far as never seeing this thing again. There's a bunch of ways you can get out of that. You can make yourself get out of it by changing key. That's one way. Just take the whole thing and change key, keeping the same melody. And see if that brings you any place. More times than not, that will take you down the road. You don't want to be on a collision course. But that will take you down the road. Somewhere. And then if that fails, and that will run out, too, then you can always go back to where you were to start. It won't work twice, it only works once. Then you go back to where you started. Yeah, because anything you do in A, it's going to be a different song in G. While you're writing it, anyway. There's too many wide passing notes in G [on the guitar] not to influence your writing, unless you're playing barre chords.

ST: Do you ever switch instruments, like from guitar to piano, while writing?

Dylan: Not so much that way. Although when it's time to record something, for me, sometimes a song that has been written on piano with just lyrics here in my hand, it'll be time to play it now on guitar. So it will come out differently. But it wouldn't have influenced the writing of the song at all. Changing keys influences the writing of the song. Changing keys on the same instrument. For me, that works. I think for somebody else, the other thing works. Everything is different.

ST: I interviewed Pete Seeger recently --

Dylan: He's a great man, Pete Seeger.

ST: I agree. He said, "All songwriters are links in a chain." Without your link in that chain, all of songwriting would have evolved much differently. You said how you brought folk music to rock music. Do you think that would have happened without you?

Dylan: Somebody else would have done it in some other kind of way. But, hey, so what? So what? You can lead people astray awfully easily. Would people have been better off? Sure. They would have found somebody else. Maybe different people would have found different people, and would have been influenced by different people.

ST: You brought the song to a new place. Is there still a new place to bring songs? Will they continue to evolve?

Dylan: [Pause] The evolution of song is like a snake with its tail in its mouth. That's evolution. That's what it is. As soon as you're there, you find your tail.

ST: Would it be okay with you if I mentioned some lines from your songs out of context to see what response you might have to them?

Dylan: Sure. You can name anything you want to name, man.

ST: "I stand here looking at your yellow railroad/in the ruins of your balcony... [from "Absolutely Sweet Marie"]

Dylan: [Pause] Okay. That's an old song. No, let's say not even old. How old? Too old. It's matured well. It's like wine. Now, you know, look, that's as complete as you can be. Every single letter in that line. It's all true. On a literal and on an escapist level.

ST: And is it truth that adds so much resonance to it?

Dylan: Oh yeah, exactly. See, you can pull it apart and it's like, "Yellow railroad?" Well, yeah. Yeah, yeah. All of it.

ST: "I was lying down in the reeds without any oxygen/I saw you in the wilderness among the men/I saw you drift into infinity and come back again..." [from "True Love Tends To Forget"].

Dylan: Those are probably lyrics left over from my songwriting days with Jacques Levy. To me, that's what they sound like. Getting back to the yellow railroad, that could be from looking some place. Being a performer you travel the world. You're not just looking off the same window everyday. You're not just walking down the same old street. So you must make yourself observe whatever. But most of the time it hits you. You don't have to observe. It hits you. Like "yellow railroad" could have been a blinding day when the sun was bright on a railroad someplace and it stayed on my mind. These aren't contrived images. These are images which are just in there and have got to come out. You know, if it's in there it's got to come out.

ST: "And the chains of the sea will be busted in the night..." [from "When The Ship Comes In"].

Dylan: To me, that song says a whole lot. Patti Labelle should do that. You know? You know, there again, that comes from hanging out

at a lot of poetry gatherings. Those kind of images are very romantic. They're very gothic and romantic at the same time. And they have a sweetness to it, also. So it's a combination of a lot of different elements at the time. That's not a contrived line. That's not sitting down and writing a song. Those kind of songs, they just come out. They're in you so they've got to come out.

ST: "Standing on the water casting your bread/while the eyes of the idol with the iron head are glowing..." [from "Jokerman"].

Dylan: [Blows small Peruvian flute] Which one is that again?

ST: That's from "Jokerman."

Dylan: That's a song that got away from me. Lots of songs on that album [Infidels] got away from me. They just did.

ST: You mean in the writing?

Dylan: Yeah. They hung around too long. They were better before they were tampered with. Of course, it was me tampering with them. [Laughs] Yeah. That could have been a good song. It could've been.

ST: I think it's tremendous.

Dylan: Oh, you do? It probably didn't hold up for me because in my mind it had been written and rewritten and written again. One of those kinds of things.

ST: "But the enemy I see wears a cloak of decency..." [from "Slow Train"].

Dylan: Now don't tell me... wait... Is that "When You Gonna Wake Up"?

ST: No, that's from "Slow Train."

Dylan: Oh, wow. Oh, yeah. Wow. There again. That's a song that you could write a song to every line in the song. You could.

ST: Many of your songs are like that.

Dylan: Well, you know, that's not good either. Not really. In the long run, it could have stood up better by maybe doing just that, maybe taking every line and making a song out of it. If somebody had the will power. But that line, there again, is an intellectual line. It's a line,

"Well, the enemy I see wears a cloak of decency," that could be a lie. It just could be. Whereas "Standing under your yellow railroad," that's not a lie. To Woody Guthrie, see, the airwaves were sacred. And when he'd hear something false, it was on airwaves that were sacred to him. His songs weren't false. Now we know the airwaves aren't sacred but to him they were. So that influenced a lot of people with me coming up. Like, "You know, all those songs on the Hit Parade are just a bunch of shit, anyway." It influenced me in the beginning when nobody had heard that. Nobody had heard that. You know, "If I give my heart to you, will you handle it with care?" Or "I'm getting sentimental over you." Who gives a shit! It could be said in a grand way, and the performer could put the song across, but come on, that's because he's a great performer not because it's a great song. Woody was also a performer and songwriter. So a lot of us got caught up in that. There ain't anything good on the radio. It doesn't happen. Then, of course, the Beatles came along and kind of grabbed everybody by the throat. You were for them or against them. You were for them or you joined them, or whatever. Then everybody said, Oh, popular song ain't so bad, and then everyone wanted to get on the radio. [Laughs] Before that it didn't matter. My first records were never played on the radio. It was unheard of! Folk records weren't played on the radio. You never heard them on the radio and nobody cared if they were on the radio. Going on into it further, after the Beatles came out and everybody from England, Rock and Roll still is an American thing. Folk music is not. Rock and roll is an American thing, it's just all kind of twisted. But the English kind of threw it back, didn't they? And they made everybody respect it once more. So everybody wanted to get on the radio. Now nobody even knows what radio is anymore. Nobody likes it that you talk to. Nobody listens to it. But, then again, it's bigger than it ever was. But nobody knows how to really respond to it. Nobody can shut it off. [Laughs] You know? And people really aren't sure whether they want to be on the radio or whether they don't want to be on the radio. They might want to sell a lot of records, but people always did that. But being a folk performer, having hits, it wasn't important. Whatever that has to do with anything... [Laughs]

ST: Your songs, like Woody's, always have defied being pop entertainment. In your songs, like his, we know a real person is talking, with lines like "You've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend."

Dylan: That's another way of writing a song, of course. Just talking to somebody that ain't there. That's the best way. That's the truest way. Then it just becomes a question of how heroic your speech is. To me, it's something to strive after.

ST: Until you record a song, no matter how heroic it is, it doesn't really exist. Do you ever feel that?

Dylan: No. If it's there, it exists.

ST: You once said that you only write about what's true, what's been proven to you, that you write about dreams but not fantasies.

Dylan: My songs really aren't dreams. They're more of a responsive nature. Waking up from a dream is... when you write a dream, it's something you try to recollect and you're never quite sure if you're getting it right or not.

ST: You said your songs are responsive. Does life have to be in turmoil for songs to come?

Dylan: Well, to me, when you need them, they appear. Your life doesn't have to be in turmoil to write a song like that but you need to be outside of it. That's why a lot of people, me myself included, write songs when one form or another of society has rejected you. So that you can truly write about it from the outside. Someone who's never been out there can only imagine it as anything, really.

ST: Outside of life itself?

Dylan: No. Outside of the situation you find yourself in. There are different types of songs and they're all called songs. But there are different types of songs just like there are different types of people, you know? There's an infinite amount of different kinds, stemming from a common folk ballad verse to people who have classical training. And with classical training, of course, then you can just apply lyrics to classical training and get things going on in positions where you've never been in before. Modern twentieth century ears are the first ears to hear these kind of Broadway songs. There wasn't anything like this. These are musical songs. These are done by people who know music first. And then lyrics. To me, Hank Williams is still the best songwriter.

ST: Hank? Better than Woody Guthrie?

Dylan: That's a good question. Hank Williams never wrote "This Land Is Your Land." But it's not that shocking for me to think of Hank Williams singing "Pastures of Plenty" or Woody Guthrie singing "Cheatin' Heart." So in a lot of ways those two writers are similar. As writers. But you mustn't forget that both of these people were performers, too. And that's another thing which separates a person

who just writes a song... People who don't perform but who are so locked into other people who do that, they can sort of feel what that other person would like to say, in a song and be able to write those lyrics. Which is a different thing from a performer who needs a song to play on stage year after year.

ST: And you always wrote your songs for yourself to sing --

Dylan: My songs were written with me in mind. In those situations, several people might say, "Do you have a song laying around?" The best songs to me -- my best songs -- are songs which were written very quickly. Yeah, very, very quickly. Just about as much time as it takes to write it down is about as long as it takes to write it. Other than that, there have been a lot of ones that haven't made it. They haven't survived. They could . They need to be dragged out, you know, and looked at again, maybe.

ST: You said once that the saddest thing about songwriting is trying to reconnect with an idea you started before, and how hard that is to do.

Dylan: To me it can't be done. To me, unless I have another writer around who might want to finish it... outside of writing with the Traveling Wilburys, my shared experience writing a song with other songwriters is not that great. Of course, unless you find the right person to write with as a partner... [Laughs] ... you're awfully lucky if you do, but if you don't, it's really more trouble than it's worth, trying to write something with somebody.

ST: Your collaborations with Jacques Levy came out pretty great.

Dylan: We both were pretty much lyricists. Yeah, very panoramic songs because, you know, after one of my lines, one of his lines would come out. Writing with Jacques wasn't difficult. It was trying to just get it down. It just didn't stop. Lyrically . Of course, my melodies are very simple anyway so they're very easy to remember.

ST: With a song like "Isis" that the two of you wrote together, did you plot that story out prior to writing the verses?

Dylan: That was a story that [Laughs] meant something to him. Yeah. It just seemed to take on a life of its own, [Laughs] as another view of history. [Laughs] Which there are so many views that don't get told. Oh history, anyway. That wasn't one of them. Ancient history but history nonetheless.

ST: Was that a story you had in mind before the song was written?

Dylan: No. With this "Isis" thing, it was "Isis"... you know, the name sort of rang a bell but not in any kind of vigorous way. So therefore, it was name-that-tune time. It was anything. The name was familiar. Most people would think they knew it from somewhere. But it seemed like just about any way it wanted to go would have been okay, just as long as it didn't get too close. [Laughs]

ST: Too close to what?

Dylan: [Laughs] Too close to me or him.

ST: People have an idea of your songs freely flowing out from you, but that song and many others of yours are so well-crafted; it has as ABAB rhyme scheme which is like something Byron would do, interlocking every line --

Dylan: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. If you've heard a lot of free verse, if you've been raised on free verse, William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings, those kind of people who wrote free verse, your ear is not going to be trained for things to sound that way. Of course, for me it's no secret that all my stuff is rhythmically oriented that way. Like a Byron line would be something as simple as "What is it you buy so dear/with your pain and with your fear?" Now that's a Byron line, but that could have been one of my lines. Up until a certain time, maybe in the twenties, that's the way poetry was. It was that way. It was... simple and easy to remember. And always in rhythm. It had a rhythm whether the music was there or not.

ST: Is rhyming fun for you?

Dylan: Well, it can be, but, you know, it's a game. You know, you sit around... you know, it's more like it's mentally... mentally... it gives you a thrill. It gives you a thrill to rhyme something you might think, "Well, that's never been rhymed before." But then again, people have taken rhyming now, it doesn't have to be exact anymore. Nobody's going to care if you rhyme 'represent' with 'ferment,' you know. Nobody's gonna care.

ST: That was a result of a lot of people of your generation for whom the craft elements of songwriting didn't seem to matter as much. But in your songs the craft is always there, along with the poetry and the energy --

Dylan: My sense of rhyme used to be more involved in my songwriting than it is... Still staying in the unconscious frame of mind, you can pull yourself out and throw up two rhymes first and work it back. You get the rhymes first and work it back and then see if you can make it make sense in another kind of way. You can still stay in the unconscious frame of mind to pull it off, which is the state of mind you have to be in anyway.

ST: So sometimes you will work backwards, like that?

Dylan: Oh, yeah. Yeah, a lot of times. That's the only way you're going to finish something. That's not uncommon, though.

ST: Do you finish songs even when you feel that maybe they're not keepers?

Dylan: Keepers or not keepers... you keep songs if you think they're any good, and if you don't... you can always give them to somebody else. If you've got songs that you're not going to do and you just don't like them... show them to other people, if you want. Then again, it all gets back to the motivation. Why you're doing what you're doing. That's what it is. [Laughs] It's confrontation with that... goddess of the self. God of the self or goddess of the self? Somebody told me that the goddess rules over the self. Gods don't concern themselves with such earthly matters. Only goddesses... would stoop so low. Or bend down so low.

ST: You mentioned that when you were writing "Every Grain Of Sand" that you felt you were in an area where no one had ever been before --

Dylan: Yeah. In that area where Keats is. Yeah. That's a good poem set to music.

ST: A beautiful melody.

Dylan: It's a beautiful melody, too, isn't it? It's a folk derivative melody. It's nothing you can put your finger on, but, you know, yeah, those melodies are great. There ain't enough of them, really. Even a song like that, the simplicity of it can be... deceiving. As far as... a song like that just may have been written in great turmoil, although you would never sense that. Written but not delivered. Some songs are better written in peace and quiet and delivered in turmoil. Others are best written in turmoil and delivered in a peaceful, quiet way. It's a magical thing, popular song. Trying to press it down into everyday numbers doesn't quite work. It's not a puzzle. There aren't pieces that

fit. It doesn't make a complete picture that's ever been seen. But, you know, as they say, thank God for songwriters.

ST: Randy Newman said that he writes his songs by going to it every day, like a job --

Dylan: Tom Paxton told me the same thing. He goes back with me, way back. He told me the same thing. Everyday he gets up and he writes a song. Well, that's great, you know, you write the song and then take your kids to school? Come home, have some lunch with the wife, you know, maybe go write another song. Then Tom said for recreation, to get himself loose, he rode his horse. And then pick up his child from school, and then go to bed with the wife. Now to me that sounds like the ideal way to write songs. To me, it couldn't be any better than that.

ST: How do you do it?

Dylan: Well, my songs aren't written on a schedule like that. In my mind it's never really been seriously a profession... It's been more confessional than professional. Then again, everybody's in it for a different reason.

ST: Do you ever sit down with the intention of writing a song, or do you wait for songs to come to you?

Dylan: Either or. Both ways. It can come... some people are... It's possible now for a songwriter to have a recording studio in his house and record a song and make a demo and do a thing. It's like the roles have changed on all that stuff. Now for me, the environment to write the song is extremely important. The environment has to bring something out in me that wants to be brought out. It's a contemplative, reflective thing. Feelings really aren't my thing. See, I don't write lies. It's a proven fact: Most people who say I love you don't mean it. Doctors have proved that. So love generates a lot of songs. Probably more so than a lot. Now it's not my intention to have love influence my songs. Any more than it influenced Chuck Berry's songs or Woody Guthrie's or Hank Williams'. Hank Williams, they're not love songs. You're degrading them songs calling them love songs. Those are songs from the Tree of Life. There's no love on the Tree of Life. Love is on the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Good and Evil. So we have a lot of songs in popular music about love . Who needs them? Not you, not me. You can use love in a lot of ways in which it will come back to hurt you. Love is a democratic principle. It's a Greek thing. A college professor told me that if you read about Greece in the history books, you'll know all about America. Nothing that happens

will puzzle you ever again. You read the history of Ancient Greece and when the Romans came in, and nothing will ever bother you about America again. You'll see what America is. Now, maybe, but there are a lot of other countries in the world besides America... [Laughs] Two. You can't forget about them. [Laughter]

ST: Have you found there are better places in the world than others to write songs?

Dylan: It's not necessary to take a trip to write a song. What a long, strange trip it's been, however. But that part of it's true, too. Environment is very important. People need peaceful, invigorating environments. Stimulating environments. In America there's a lot of repression. A lot of people who are repressed. They'd like to get out of town, they just don't know how to do it. And so, it holds back creativity. It's like you go somewhere and you can't help but feel it. Or people even tell it to you, you know? What got me into the whole thing in the beginning wasn't songwriting. That's not what got me into it. When "Hound Dog" came across the radio, there was nothing in my mind that said, "Wow, what a great song, I wonder who wrote that?" It didn't really concern me who wrote it. It didn't matter who wrote it. It was just... it was just there. Same way with me now. You hear a good song. Now you think to yourself, maybe, "Who wrote it?" Why? Because the performer's not as good as the song, maybe. The performer's got to transcend that song. At least come up to it. A good performer can always make a bad song sound good. Record albums are filled with good performers singing filler stuff. Everybody can say they've done that. Whether you wrote it or whether somebody else wrote it, it doesn't matter. What interested me was being a musician. The singer was important and so was the song. But being a musician was always first and foremost in the back of my mind. That's why, while other people were learning... whatever they were learning. What were they learning way back then?

ST: "Ride, Sally, Ride"?

Dylan: Something like that. Or "Run, Rudolph, Run." When the others were doing "Run, Rudolph, Run," my interests were going more to Leadbelly kind of stuff, when he was playing a Steel 12-string guitar. Like, how does the guy do that? Where can one of these be found, a 12-string guitar? They didn't have any in my town. My intellect always felt that way. Of the music. Like Paul Whiteman. Paul Whiteman creates a mood. Bing Crosby's early records. They created a mood, like that Cab Calloway, kind of spooky horn kind of stuff. Violins, when big bands had a sound to them, without the Broadway glitz. Once that Broadway trip got into it, it became all sparkly and Las Vegas, really.

But it wasn't always so. Music created an environment. It doesn't happen anymore. Why? Maybe technology has just booted it out and there's no need for it. Because we have a screen which supposedly is three-dimensional. Or comes across as three-dimensional. It would like you to believe it's three-dimensional. Well, you know, like old movies and stuff like that that's influenced so many of us who grew up on that stuff. [Picks up Peruvian flute] Like this old thing, here, it's nothing, it's some kind of, what is it?... Listen: [Plays a slow tune on the flute] Here, listen to this song. [Plays more] Okay. That's a song. It don't have any words. Why do songs need words? They don't. Songs don't need words. They don't.

ST: Do you feel satisfied with your body of work?

Dylan: Most everything, yeah.

ST: Do you spend a lot of time writing songs?

Dylan: Well, did you hear that record that Columbia released last year, *Down In The Groove* ? Those songs, they came in pretty easy.

ST: I'd like to mention some of your songs, and see what response you have to them.

Dylan: Okay.

ST: "One More Cup Of Coffee" [from "Desire"]

Dylan: [Pause] Was that for a coffee commercial? No... It's a gypsy song. That song was written during a gypsy festival in the south of France one summer. Somebody took me there to the gypsy high holy days which coincide with my own particular birthday. So somebody took me to a birthday party there once, and hanging out there for a week probably influenced the writing of that song. But the "valley below" probably came from someplace else. My feeling about the song was that the verses came from someplace else. It wasn't about anything, so this "valley below" thing became the fixture to hang it on. But "valley below" could mean anything.

ST: "Precious Angel" [from "Slow Train Comin'"]

Dylan: Yeah. That's another one, it could go on forever. There's too many verses and there's not enough. You know? When people ask me, "How come you don't sing that song anymore?" It's like it's another one of those songs: it's just too much and not enough. A lot of my songs strike me that way. That's the natural thing about them to me.

It's too hard to wonder why about them. To me, they're not worthy of wondering why about them. They're songs . They're not written in stone . They're on plastic.

ST: To us, though, they are written in stone, because Bob

Dylan wrote them. I've been amazed by the way you've changed some of your great songs --

Dylan: Right. Somebody told me that Tennyson often wanted to rewrite his poems when he saw them in print.

ST: "I and I" [from "Infidels"]

Dylan: [Pause] That was one of them Caribbean songs. One year a bunch of songs just came to me hanging around down in the islands, and that was one of them.

ST: "Joey" [from "Desire"]

Dylan: To me, that's a great song. Yeah. And it never loses its appeal.

ST: And it has one of the greatest visual endings of any song.

Dylan: That's a tremendous song. And you'd only know that singing it night after night. You know who got me singing that song? [Jerry] Garcia. Yeah. He got me singing that song again. He said that's one of the best songs ever written. Coming from him , it was hard to know which way to take that. [Laughs] He got me singing that song again with them [The Grateful Dead]. It was amazing how it would, right from the gat go, it had a life of its own, it just ran out of the gate and it just kept on getting better and better and better and better and it keeps on getting better. It's in its infant stages, as a performance thing. Of course, it's a long song. But, to me, not to blow my own horn, but to me the song is like a Homer ballad. Much more so than "A Hard Rain," which is a long song, too. But, to me, "Joey" has a Homeric quality to it that you don't hear everyday. Especially in popular music.

ST: "Ring Them Bells" [from "Oh Mercy"]

Dylan: It stands up when you hear it played by me. But if another performer did it, you might find that it probably wouldn't have as much to do with bells as what the title proclaims. Somebody once came and sang it in my dressing room. To me. [Laughs] To try to influence me to sing it that night. [Laughter] It could have gone either way, you know. Elliot Mintz: Which way did it go?

Dylan: It went right out the door. [Laughter] It went out the door and didn't come back. Listening to this song that was on my record, sung by someone who wanted me to sing it... There was no way he was going to get me to sing it like that. A great performer, too.

ST: "Idiot Wind" [from "Blood On The Tracks"]

Dylan: "Idiot Wind." Yeah, you know, obviously, if you've heard both versions you realize, of course, that there could be a myriad of verses for the thing. It doesn't stop . It wouldn't stop. Where do you end? You could still be writing it, really. It's something that could be a work continually in progress. Although, on saying that, let me say that my lyrics, to my way of thinking, are better for my songs than anybody else's. People have felt about my songs sometimes the same way as me. And they say to me, your songs are so opaque that, people tell me, they have feelings they'd like to express within the same framework. My response, always, is go ahead, do it, if you feel like it. But it never comes off. They're not as good as my lyrics. There's just something about my lyrics that just have a gallantry to them. And that might be all they have going for them. [Laughs] However, it's no small thing.